MEMOIR OF JOHN HILBORN

NOTE: Last week, while at Hilborn, two miles south of the village of Cedar Run on Pine Creek, Lycoming County, Pennsylvania, we called at the residence of Mr. and Mrs. John Hilborn, and were shown some very interesting documents and data concerning the relatives of Mr. Hilborn, narrating events which occurred during the Revolutionary War, and we were permitted to copy a narrative of John Hilborn, who was taken prisoner by the Indians and teken to Canada in 1778. We also saw a poem that was composed upon his return from captivity, which was in a splendid state of preservation although written over one hundred years ago. The present John Hilborn was born in Brown Township, Lycoming County, Pennsylvania in the year 1844, and is married to a sister of ex-sheriff Jefferson Gamble of Cedar Run. The papers and records referred to are the property of Mrs. Charlotte Moyer of Danville, Pennsylvania and a descendent of the John Hilborn of Revolutionary fame. We copied the following article from the Columbia Gazette, dated June 24, 1826, which paper copied the following from the Bucks County Patriot:-

Died, on the 15th of April, 1826, on his farm at Harmony, on the great bend of the Susquehanna, the Honorable John Hilborn, aged nearly eighty-five years. He was a native of Bucks County, born in Springfield Township, and brought up by his grandfather, Stephen Twining, who had a grist mill near the place where Fonk's mill now stands, on Durham Creek.

For a number of years afterwards, he conducted a merchant mill on the Neshaminy, for the late John Thompson, who before the Revolution kept a store at what is called the "Pines." Since that time, he tended a saw mill for the late Joseph Wilkinson, at Corells so that his character must be well known to many of your readers.

The most memorable circumstance of his life was his captivity among the Indians during the Revolutionary War, a narrative of which he gave me with permission if I survived him, to have it published. It is in his own words as he gave it to me on the 16th of June, 1787, in Northampton County.

As we came in sight of the burnt house and the pinnacle, on Brodheads Creek, where he was captured, he halted and desired me to relate the story as he should relate it.

Early one morning, an old woman by the name of Soliday, who lived two miles above here, came running to Hilborn's house. She told them her scalp was partially torn off and the others taken,and that she was only suffered to escape on account of her age. Joseph Hilborn fled with his wife across Brodheads Creek, but between the fright and exposure to the water, she never fully recovered from the shock.

John, however, remembered his promise to Price and thought, as a hunter knowing well the woods, he could carry the information to him in safety. About one mile from the house was a small conical hill which Hilborn resolved to ascend for the purpose, if possible , to ascertain the motives of the Indians. In so doing, however, he did but accelerate his fate; for the Indians had taken

possesion before him and upon his advance presented their guns at him and demanded his surrender. There was no alternative. He submitted and they extorted a promise from him never to attempt an escape. They then bound a burr then on his back and ordered him to march. He soon discovered that they had all the family with them except one little boy, who made so much noise that they killed and scalped him.

According to Indian customs, they travelled on the highest ground to keep a look-out. As they came in sight of John Price's house, the Indians closely examined Hilborn as to who lived there, what sort of man was he, did he keep a gun, was he rich, etc. It severely exercised his mind- he was all anxiety to save Price, and he knew well that if the Indians found anything misrepresented, it would be worse for them all.

He told them the plain truth--that he was a poor, inoffensive man, had nothing to do with war, and that he did keep a gun to support his family in meat. They held a council in the Indian tongue and his heart was almost in his mouth when the Indian chief pronounced in English "Let them live." As it appeared to him, the Indians had great confidence in what he said and that it fully appeared to be the best policy that he could pursue for his own benefit or the other prisoners, to improve that confidence on all occasions.

The Indians hurried their march for fear of being pursued and suffered great hardships, particularly the women and children, in wading the many deep streams of water--he fully discovered that their sufferings excited sympathy, and created natural affection

and there was a great diversity in the characters and disposition of the Indians. The Indian captian, like many whites, was proud and elevated with his promotion to command. But the most conspicuous and amiable character amongst the Indians was a private, a little, smart active Mohawk; he commiserated the sufferings of the prisoners and even voluntarily exerted himself to assist the women and children across waters or when in any difficulty.

The two worst of the Indian Company were white men--the one ought to have his name recorded, it was Thomas Hill. John Hilborn had known him in Delaware. His brutal conduct to the women prisoners was such that the Indian captain endeavored to shame him. The little Mohawk treated him on every occassion with the utmost contempt and showed plainly that he wanted to be at him. Among the prisoners, there was a pretty little girl and she would cry for milk and more victuals. The Mohawk would carry and try to sooth her, by promising her plenty of milk and good victuals when they reached Chemung, which he afterwards fulfilled; but Thomas Hill, on the contrary, would try to thwart the child, show her her little brothers scalp and almost set her distracted. This was not approved by the Indians. They had great difficulty in fording the Susquehanna at Tioga Point, and had not the Mohawk and John Hilborn exerted themselves in a most extra-ordinary manner, two of the women would have been drowned.

The whole company being safely arrived at Tioga Point, the Indian captain, got the first time thought them out of danger of pursuit. A respite was admitted for hunting, fishing,

etc, and they obtained plenty of fresh provisions while they rested from a severe hurrying journey. From Tioga Point to Chemung on a direct line is 20 miles, by the meanders of Tioga River, between 25 and 30. At Tioga Point, they had canoes, and all the 'back' loads were put on board and consigned to John Hilborn to conduct to Chemung. They proceeded very slowly, hunting, fishing, eating fresh provisions on the way.

One antedote is worth recording: The Indian Captain killed a large buck. He ordered John Hilborn to skin it. He was from his great hardship, too weak to strip the skin off the neck. The captain spoke harshly to him. The little Mohawk was present and from Indian words, they proceeded to Indian blows and the Mohawk, being the most quick, whipped the Captain in so severe a manner that he made him skin his own deer.

When they arrived at Chemung town, according to Indian custom, all prisoners must run the gauntlet--all the Indians, young and old, stand in two rows with switches, and the prisoners must run between them, each Indian paying on according to his discretion. When his turn came to run, he had suffered so much from abuse of others, and his feet were so sore as he had no shoes--he could not run. The Mohawk, seeing that, told him to sit down and that he would run for him. The Indians paid on him more severely than any of the others and he prided himself on bearing it all with heroic bravery without flinching.

After the gauntlet, the Indians treated all the prisoners as to provisions, as well as they lived themselves, and their business was to hoe corn, of which they had the largest crop and the best grain he ever saw.

As there were women enough to hoe the corn, the men held a council upon another war expedition. The Mohawk, who was in the council, informed Hilborn that it was to be on the West Branch of the Susquehanna, and, as the former captain had been disgraced by a whipping, they had chosen another, John Montour, the same who, in the following season, Gilbert and family. Hilborn was alarmed, as he feared that a defeat would make worse times for the prisoners, who were at that time treated well, and as he found himself somewhat recruited, he formed a plan for his escape.

A division of the American Army was then at Wyoming, this he knew, for he had heard the morning and evening gun on their journey. The Indians had several good running canoes and Hilborn resolved to take the best while the Indians were asleep and go down the stream to Wyoming. As he was a good waterman, he had no doubts of getting far enough in advance before the discovery of his flight to elude all pursuit. One consideration restrained him. Would such conduct be right? He concluded to live a few days longer at his labors and consider on its propriety.

In the first place, he had solemnly engaged, to save his life, and that he would never run away, and that the Indians had placed full confidence in him--but then it was extorted by fear.

Secondly, should he, professing to be a Christian, set a bad example? What would be the sad consequence of such a deviation to his fellow prisoners, or others hereafter under similar circumstance

This seriously claimed his reflection and he found the most

real peace and inward comfort of mind, come life or death, to strictly adhere to the solemn promise that he had made, and found a sweeter sleep by a full resignation to his fate that in any flattering prospect of success in an attempt to escape.

In the most secret councils of war, there is generally treachery. Soon after it was agreed to send Gen. Sullivan to dislodge the Indians from the waters of Tioga and Ganessee Rivers, it was known in the British forces at Niagara, and the noted Col. Brandt was sent to Chemung to make arrangements for defense before there was any movement made by Gen. Sullivan. When the Indians heard of their intended destruction (that took place,) they were violently irritated.

The Mohawk advised Hilborn to plead his cause before Gen. Brandt, who, as he understood, had been educated in an New England College and visited London with Guy Johnston. He approved the advice.

He found Col. Brandt in a calico morning gown, writing in his tent, who received him with the politeness of a gentleman, and he pleaded his cause as well as he could, saying that he was a Quaker, and had nothing to do with war, and that it was against his principles to fight. Brandt replied, "I believe you, but all the prisoners say the same." He then said, "If you believe me, why can I not be discharged? Brandt replied, "You are a prisoner to the Delaware tribe. I am a Mohawk: I have not the authority."

The next morning, he was ordered to prepare to march to the fortress at Niagara. He had no shoes nor any clothing except the same he was captured in. It appeared to have been Brandt's policy to send all the prisoners that way to prevent their giving

intelligence to the Americans.

Hilborn was marched under an Indian guard. His greatest suffering was marching barefooted over the sharp stones or gravel on the beach of the Seneca Lake, from which one of his feet never recovered. At Niagara, the Indians were paid their bounty for him as a prisoner. He was ordered to Quebec and put into a sloop, sailed down Lake Ontario, then in a batteau down the river Saint Lawrence. He said some parts were very swift and appeared dangerous, but the watermen acted with great ability. Although they were all French and he could not understand them, they used him kindly, and he arrived at Quebec just two months after his capture.

As he was a prisoner, he was sold to the highest bidder to refund the bounty paid to the Indians. His almost naked and reduced situation, when exposed to sale was truly pitiful. To use his own words, "My appearance was not merchantable." Fortunately, he fell into the hands of a veteran colonel who had been aid to Gen. Wolfe. This gentleman, pitying his forlorn situation, advanced money to cloth himself comfortably and employed him in a very handsome grist mill of his own. There Hilborn behaved so well that in a short time he was intrusted with the exclusive management of the mill and his situation was made very comfortable.

However, he became very impatient to return to his home, and the second winter of his residence with the worthy colonel, he asked his permission to return, when the spring should open, to his own country, to meet once more his relatives. The colonel appeared to hear his request with much concern, and offered him high wages if he consent to remain and attend to the mill. But nothing could

induce him to stay. His longings for his native home was not to be appeased by gold.

As soon as the navigation opened, he settled for the redemption of purchase money and all that had been advanced to him for clothing and necessaries, and his master allowed him such wages as he pleased for, as a bought servant, he made no charges. His master made out that there was something due to him, for which he paid him 10 guineas and passage to New York and they parted in the best friendship and good wishes for each other.

When they put to sea, they sailed along gaily, the wind and the weather favorable and catching plenty of mackeral. His passage was paid, he had comfortable clothing, had paid for his freedom by honest labor, and for the first time since he was captured had money in his pocket. But how soon are fair prospects. The Captain, speaking a vessel, was informed that a French fleet was on the coast capturing every British sail, and he gave over his voyage to New York and put in at Halifax.

Here he suffered many hardships in consequence of the scarcity of provisions, his money soon went and he was soon reduced to extreme distress. At length, the commander of the garrison, in order to get rid of some hungry mouths, permitted Hilborn and some Yankees to take an old sloop and endeavor to find their way to New York. After meeting with much rough water, and great hardships, they at length arrived at Sandy Hook, where Hilborn reminded the master of the vessel of a promise to put him on shore in New Jersey.

The war was not yet ended, and as he traveled through New Jersey, his very distressed appearance rendered him an object of

pity and attention and he obtained every attention from those hospitable people. As he had been starved, he ate sparingly and found that he gained strength. As he approached the Delaware, he learned that all the ferries were guarded so that none could cross. It was mid-summer, the water was low and warm, and he knew well the best ford in Delaware, so that by wading and swimming, he was able to reach Pennsylvania shores and a house in Upper Makefield, where was his venerable father, a brother and a sister. From his very emaciated appearance, none knew him and he was necessitated to inform them who he was. Such scenes as followed is easier concieved than expressed. It was then two years and some months that he had been captured, during which time they had never known whether he was living or dead--and here I close the narrative.

NOTE: Since John Hilborn lived at Harmony, the noted Thomas Hill stopped there all night. John Hilborn knew him and treated him well but he did not know John Hilborn and was talkative about the Delaware but had little reply. The next morning, he asked for his bill. J. H. replied, "It is not my practice to charge old acquaintances." He started and asked, "What acquaintance?" J. H. said, "Thomas Hill, hast thou forgot our journey in company from Brodheads Creek to Chemung" and said no more. Finis

Re-Copied by

Henry W. Shoemaker

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